

Reward key element

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MAR 27 1983

Oakland Police homicide Sgt. John Vargas is the first to admit he initially "had nothing, nothing at all" in the way of clues to the murder of a 24-year-old convenience store clerk.

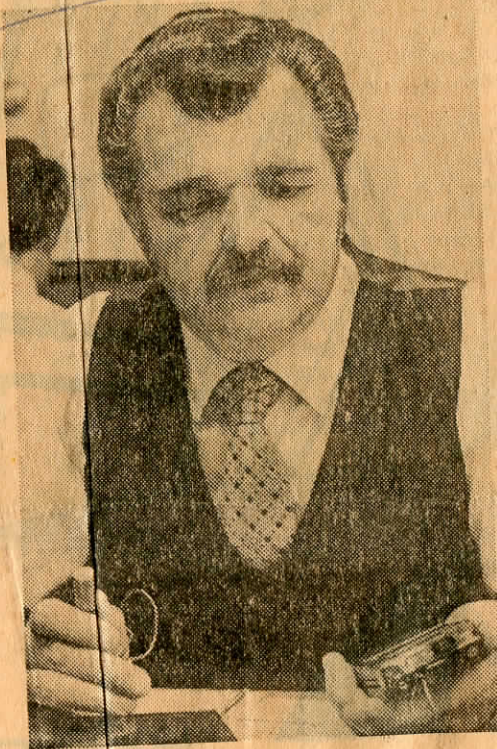
But within two weeks, thanks to a \$25,000 reward, a courageous informant, hidden recording devices and tried and proven police techniques, four people were in custody and charged with the murder of clerk Francisco Villar.

Based on Municipal Court documents and interviews with investigators, this is how police investigated the case and arrested the suspects with the help of a "Mr. X."

It was Sunday, Feb. 13, when Villar was shot without provocation by robbers who took less than \$50 from the cash register at the 7-Eleven Store in the 4700 block of MacArthur Boulevard in Oakland.

It was also the last day of the week-long homicide standby Vargas and his partner, Sgt. Frank Mellott pull every four weeks. It had been an uneventful week for the two investigators, who had only one accidental shooting death that required their presence on the scene.

But just after 1 a.m. Sunday, Var-



Sgt. John Vargas

At first, there were few clues

gas' telephone rang. It was the Police Department calling with the news homicide investigators hate to hear — one dead and no one in custody.

Recounting details of the case Vargas, the primary investigator, said at first he was up against a blank wall.

He said he did have some partial fingerprints off the door to the store.

But what he also had was a store surveillance camera that was not activated and few details from four witnesses inside the store when the robbery-shooting occurred.

The first thing he did was put out the police press release of the killing, leaving out details that reporters consider essential but what police like to keep for themselves, saying only the killers and investigators know them.

Those included model and color of the getaway car, that only two of the suspects were armed and that they had scarves covering their faces.

A check was made with the robbery section to see if they had any similar cases, but where no one was shot. The fingerprints of possible suspects in those cases were compared with the prints recovered at the store to no avail.

By then two days had passed and the usually unspoken adage of homicide in-

nt in arrests

investigators was starting to be felt. If you don't have the suspect within 24 hours, you'll never have him.

Then Vargas got the break that helped lead to the suspects. Southland Corporation, the parent company of 7-Eleven put up a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and indictment of the suspects.

The Tribune printed a story about the reward Feb. 16 and police distributed hundreds of fliers. The wait started.

The first call police received about the case after the reward was announced came Feb. 22.

A message was left for Vargas on the recording machine homicide investigators use when not in their office.

Vargas called back when he came to work. "I know who killed the clerk at the 7-11," said the voice over the phone. After some more conversation Vargas asked the man to come to the police department after he got off work.

Later that day a man Vargas prefers to call "Mr. X" came in and started talking. He admitted he was mainly interested in the reward but also said he was disturbed by what had happened.

"At first I was a little doubtful," Vargas recalled. "Most of what he was saying was stuff that was in the pa-

pers."

But when the man started giving details about the shooting that had not been made public Vargas realized he had something.

Mr. X reportedly told Vargas and Mellott he had heard that an Albert Williams, whom he knew, had been bragging about killing a store clerk. And, Vargas said, Mr. X claimed Williams and another man, Malcolm Molsone, even carried a newspaper clipping about the death. The informant also had a possible third suspect, but he only had the man's first name — Frank.

Continuing, Mr. X said that on Feb. 17, he went for a drive with Williams. During a conversation, Williams allegedly told Mr. X that the clerk was shot because "he moved like he was reaching for something."

(Vargas said the clerk was only ducking from the gun pointed at him.)

Mr. X said that three days later he telephoned Williams and again asked him if he and Molsone "really did the 7-11 store" to which Williams allegedly replied they had.

In the course of the interview with Mr. X on Feb. 22 Vargas had him identify photographs of Williams and Molsone. Mr. X was also asked by the in-

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investigators to contact Williams again and get more information.

"I wanted something to substantiate the truthfulness of his statements and make sure he did not have a grudge," Vargas said.

Meanwhile, Vargas had the fingerprints of the two men compared with the prints from the store door. But there was no match. He and Mellott also poured over hundreds of reports trying unsuccessfully to get a last name for Frank.

On Feb. 24 Mr. X gave police Frank's last name — Hunter.

Four days after that, Mr. X called police again and said Williams had told him what happened at the store. Molsone, Mr. X said Williams told him,

actually shot the clerk and Hunter jumped the counter and grabbed the money out of the register. Williams, according to Mr. X, said he had only fired a warning shot into the ceiling and the three fled in a car driven by Williams' 16-year-old girlfriend.

Vargas and Mellott now had the players and the scenario but they still needed evidence to stand up in court and support the informant's statements.

A short time after Mr. X's call on Feb. 28, the sergeants got their first confirming evidence. The crime lab notified them that Hunter's left palm print matched one taken from the exterior of the store's glass door.

Still needing more, Vargas convinced Mr. X to meet Williams again on March 1 with a tape recorder. Police

rented a car, with a hidden recorder, for Mr. X.

During a trip to San Leandro, "on the pretext of setting up another robbery" Vargas said, Mr. X got Williams on tape to describe Villar's slaying as well as to admit to two other robberies.

With that, Vargas had enough for warrants for the four.

By March 3, Williams, Molsone and the girl were in custody and had given statements about their involvement. But Hunter was still at large.

Mr. X was still not through. The next day he spotted Hunter getting on a bus in East Oakland, followed him on board and rode downtown with him to a theater. From there he called police and when officers arrived Mr. X calmly stood by and pointed out the suspect.